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(02-23) 18:03 PST SAN FRANCISCO (AP) --

Japanese-Americans gathered Sunday to light candles in a solemn salute to more than 100,000 of their forefathers who were rounded up and interned behind barbed wire after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

"Day of Remembrance" ceremonies here and across the state and nation are particularly important this year, according to participants, because what had become accepted as an outrageous government policy no longer seems so taboo.

Japanese-American activists pointed to comments by a North Carolina congressman who earlier this month suggested the internment was the right decision -- as well as their own families' experience that the government can take away civil liberties in times of crisis.

"The day of remembrance today comes at a critical juncture in this country, where civil rights are being sacrificed for the vague notion of national security," said Dale Minami, a San Francisco lawyer with an extensive civil rights background.

"What happened to Japanese-Americans is happening to Arab Americans and Muslim Americans today," said Minami, whose grandfather was taken from his job selling life insurance in Los Angeles in 1941. "The denial of constitutional rights and the repression, the war on dissent -- it's all being replicated."

It was a common theme Sunday in San Francisco, where a large movie theater full of hundreds of Japanese-Americans gathered to reflect at an afternoon gathering. Similar ceremonies have been held this month in cities including Los Angeles and Sacramento and Japanese-Americans in New York have plans for an event next month.

Unlike World War II, whole segments of the American population aren't being rounded up and detained -- though some Americans have been held for months without access to courts as part of the Sept. 11 investigation.

But that wasn't the first step after the Pearl Harbor bombing either, said remembrance day organizer Julie Hatta.

It wasn't until Feb. 19, 1942, -- more than two months after Pearl Harbor -- that President Roosevelt signed an order authorizing internment. Some Japanese-Americans had as little as 24 hours to sell or store possessions they could not carry and were kept under the watch of armed guards in isolated camps until 1946.

A U.S. government study later called the internment "a grave personal injustice" to people of Japanese ancestry that was the result of "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership." After

extensive lobbying and public education campaigns, the federal government began paying survivors \$20,000 starting in 1990.

Hatta, whose Buddhist priest father was whisked away from the family in Hawaii soon after Pearl Harbor, said what worries her is that laws passed after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks expanded government policing powers.

"There seems to be even more leeway to be taken away without reasonable cause," she said. "It seems to be wide-open for it to happen again, unless people speak up."

That didn't happen enough earlier this month, Hatta said, when North Carolina Republican Rep. Howard Coble told a radio interviewer that internment of Arab Americans isn't justified but the government's World War II policy was "a very, very cruel thing to do" but the right decision at the time.

Coble later apologized for his remarks, saying the policy was damaging and "in fact the wrong decision and an action that should never be repeated." A call to Coble's North Carolina district office was not returned Sunday.

Hatta and others questioned why Republican leaders have not reacted to Coble's comments with the same vigor as when they forced Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss., to resign as Senate majority leader after he praised a segregationist presidential candidate.

She joined calls that Coble resign as chairman of the House subcommittee overseeing homeland security.

"Why do they not feel the need to speak up? Is it because people say we're Asian and we don't make a fuss -- we're the model minority," Hatta said. "You just start speculating when people don't speak up the way you would expect them to."

On the Net:

www.dayofremembrance.org

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